

How Serious Is the Islamic State Threat to China?

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On February 27, 2017, Islamic State's media house of al-Furat circulated an online propaganda video entitled "Children of the Caliphate." The video was produced in the west of Iraq and featured around 30 Chinese Uyghur militants fighting in the battlefield, along with 20 children in a training camp and studying in a madrasa. The Uyghur fighters threatened to come to China to "spill rivers of blood as revenge on behalf of the oppressed" and to "plant the caliphate's flag."

The footage underlines the growing military and tactical strength of ISIS Uyghur fighters, who are now more unified, ambitious, and brutal than ever before. In spite of this evolving dynamic, an ISIS-centric threat to China remains less serious compared to the al-Qaeda-linked Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which was formerly known as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It is unlikely that a propaganda video will influence Beijing to fundamentally reconsider its current counterterrorism approach. China's priority has been to fight a "TIP-directed domestic threat" in the Xinjiang province rather than participating in the international military campaign against Islamic State in the Middle East.

How Great Is the ISIS Threat to China?

Islamic State's anti-Chinese activities have predominantly focused on online propaganda efforts, without showing any potential to pose a real physical threat to the country. China became the focus of the group in July 2014, when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi listed China as a battlefield to "wage jihad for the oppression" of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang. Since then, ISIS has produced a total of three propaganda videos of Uyghur fighters and an audio message in Mandarin that target both sympathetic and hostile audiences. The central objective of these propaganda efforts is to recruit and mobilize Uyghurs through publicizing the minority's cause and intimidating Islamic State's opponents, including China and the TIP.

The latest video was the first time that a group of Uyghur militants publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS, and demonstrated that the Uyghurs of ISIS are now better organized. However, Islamic State's Uyghurs will remain a threat mainly to Chinese overseas interests, particularly in the

Middle East and Turkey, rather than to the mainland itself. This became evident after the execution of a Chinese hostage, along with a Norwegian citizen, by ISIS in Syria in 2015. The aforementioned case has been the first and only known case of deliberate killing of a non-combatant Chinese citizen by the terrorist group. ISIS has sleeper cells of Uyghur recruiters, fundraisers, and operatives in Turkey as well, which may get activated to carry out attacks against the Chinese targets in Turkey.

So far, ISIS has not gained much traction among the Uyghur Muslim population in Xinjiang, where the TIP has traditionally been effective in propaganda outreach and recruitment. To date, there has been no report on the presence of any ISIS Uyghur member, active supporter, or returnee fighter in China and its immediate neighborhood, particularly in Central and South Asia. Without covert or overt operational presence, Islamic State's capability to orchestrate mid- and large-scale attacks in China will be limited. Given the already-high security presence and strict control over information flows, it will be hard for ISIS to prompt home-grown attacks in China.

TIP Threat Remains Preponderant

TIP's two-decade long dominance and strong ideological influence among the Uyghur militant elements in and beyond China has not provided ISIS with an opportunity to fully exploit the grievances of Uyghurs and evolve into a potent threat group through actively expanding their ideological and recruitment activities. TIP is much stronger than the ISIS Uyghurs in terms of operational capability, ideological influence, recruitment, and manpower. Even in Syria, the contemporary terrorist threat to China stems more from Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al Nusra), with which TIP has established operational links.

TIP has an extended operational outreach outside of Afghanistan and the Middle East where it is currently headquartered and fighting in. The group's transnational network also operates in China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Central Asia. In August 2016, a group of TIP, Kateeba Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham operatives coming from Syria, Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan carried out a car suicide bombing attack at the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The suicide attack, which wounded six people – three Kyrgyz citizens and three Chinese staff of the embassy – underscored TIP's capability to mount sophisticated and premeditated attacks against China and hit targets with considerable security as far away as Kyrgyzstan.

ISIS has been losing Uyghur recruits to TIP. A 2016 report published

by New America, a Washington-based think tank, revealed that 114 Uyghurs joined ISIS, while TIP is believed to have 1,000 to 2,000 Uyghur fighters in Syria and Iraq. This does not even include its militants in Afghanistan. In 2016 alone, TIP produced more than 200 online video and audio propaganda materials in Uyghur language, widely disseminated by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), al-Qaeda's online extremist distribution network.

ISIS Propaganda Targets TIP

ISIS propaganda efforts are aimed at increasing the mobilization and recruitment of Uyghurs through delegitimizing and intimidating its opponent, namely TIP. A Uyghur fighter who appeared in the latest IS video criticized and condemned TIP as “apostate” and discouraged Uyghurs from joining this group. In separate scenes, a Uyghur fighter and a teenage boy slaughtered and shot down two unknown “informants” in the presence of children. It was the first time that Uyghur militants publicly replicated an ISIS-style grotesque execution.

The public nature of this brutality has clear psychological, strategic, and ideological objectives. On one hand, brutality is a deliberate attempt to “brand” the group to mobilize and recruit Uyghurs in its own ranks. On the other hand, demonstration of its ferocity could be part of a larger intimidation strategy meant to prevent possible defection of Uyghurs from ISIS to TIP, especially amidst significant military setbacks that ISIS is presently facing in Syria and Iraq.

China's Response: What to Expect?

Beijing is likely to be alarmed by Islamic State's criticism of its treatment of the Uyghur Muslims and the group's warning of an attack on China. After the release of the video, there has been a flurry of reactions from Chinese officialdom. Chinese President Xi Jinping, according to Reuters, has called for a “great wall of iron” to safeguard Xinjiang, while the state commissioner for counterterrorism and security said Islamist separatists pose the “most prominent” challenge to China's stability and security. The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasized its willingness to work with the international community to fight terrorism.

However, China is unlikely join the international military operations against ISIS in the Middle East. Due to its longstanding non-interference foreign policy approach, Beijing has consistently refrained from direct involvement in overseas conflict, while offering diplomatic support to the

Syrian government.

Nevertheless, whether or not ISIS presents an imminent threat to China, Beijing is likely to use the imagined threat as excuse to escalate its security crackdown in Xinjiang where it has been fighting a low-level ethno-nationalist separatist conflict and long-standing inter-ethnic tension between local Uyghur and Han communities. Islamic State's propaganda may just provide a justification for the Chinese authorities to further establish their writ in the troubled province.

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